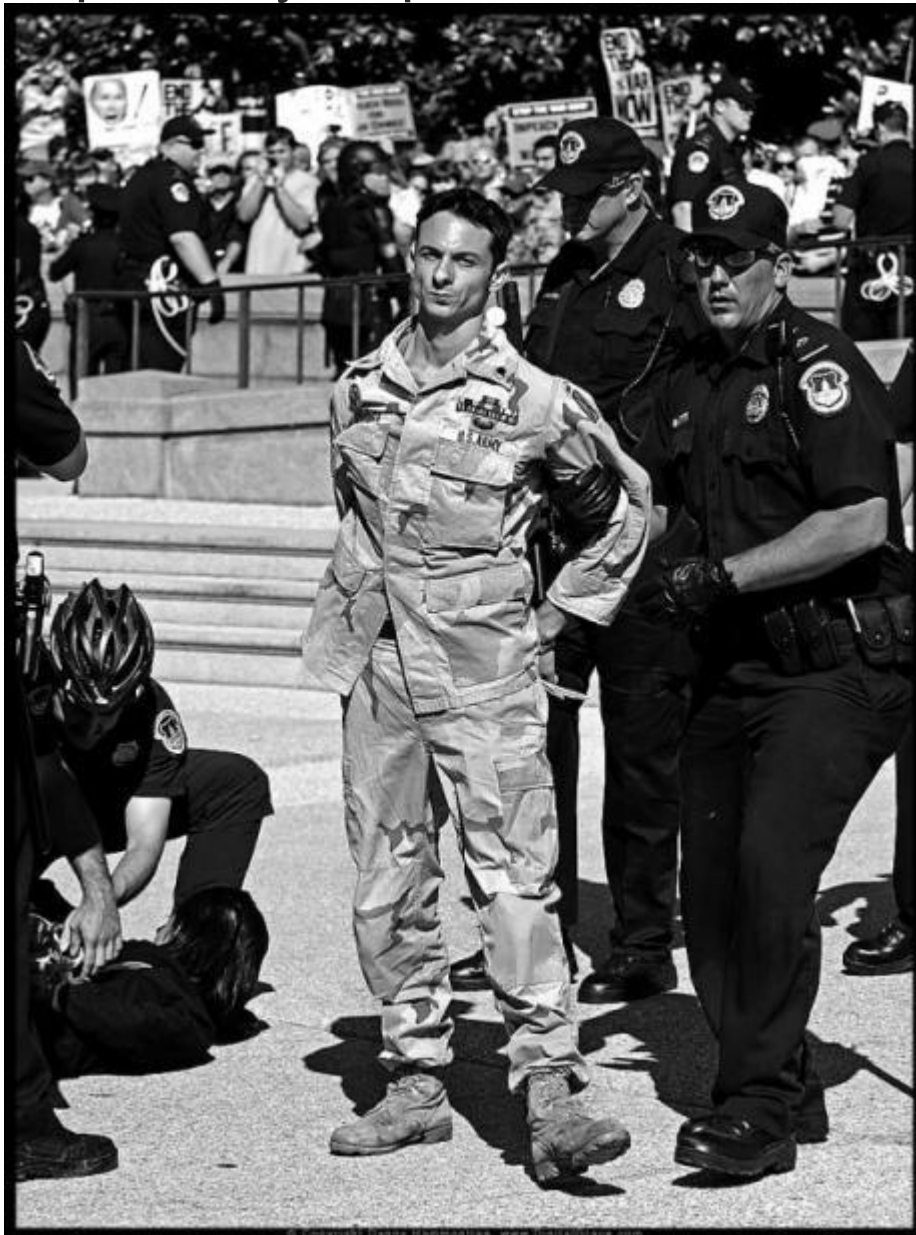


"The enemy is the system that sends us to war"

- Speech by Iraq war veteran



A speech given by former US soldier and Iraq war veteran Mike Prysner in 2009.

When I first joined the army, we were told that racism no longer existed in the military. A legacy of inequality and discrimination was suddenly washed away by something called "Equal Opportunity." We would sit through mandatory classes, assuring us that racism had been eliminated from the ranks, and every unit had its own EO representative to ensure no elements of racism could resurface. The Army seemed firmly dedicated to smashing any hint of racism.

And then Sept. 11 happened. I began to hear new words like "towel head," "camel jockey" and - the most disturbing - "sand nigger." These words did not initially come from my fellow soldiers, but from my superiors - my platoon sergeant, my company first sergeant, my battalion commander. All the way up the chain of command, viciously racist terms were suddenly acceptable. I noticed that the most overt racism came from veterans of the first Gulf War. Those were the words they used when they

were incinerating civilian convoys. Those were the words they used when this government deliberately targeted the civilian infrastructure, bombing water supplies knowing that it would kill hundreds of thousands of children.

Those were the words the American people used when they allowed this government to sanction Iraq - and this is something many people forget. We've just learned that we've killed over 1 million Iraqis since the invasion; we had already killed a million Iraqis before the invasion throughout the 90s through bombings and sanctions. 'Haji' was the enemy. When I got to Iraq in 2003, I learned a new word - "Haji." Haji was the enemy. Haji was every Iraqi. He was not a person, or a father, or a teacher, or a worker. But where does this word come from? Every Muslim strives to take a pilgrimage to Mecca, called a Haj. A Muslim who has completed that pilgrimage is a Haji. It is something that, in traditional Islam, is the highest calling in the religion - essentially, the best thing for a Muslim made into the worst thing. But history did not start with us. Since the creation of this country, racism has been used to justify expansion and oppression. The Native Americans were called savages.

The Africans were called all sorts of things to excuse slavery. A multitude of names were used during Vietnam to justify that imperialist war. So Haji was the word we used on this mission. We've heard a lot about raids during Winter Soldier, kicking down people's doors and ransacking their homes. But this mission was a different kind of raid. We never got any explanation for these orders, we were only told that this group of five or six houses were now property of the U.S. military. We had to go in and make those people leave those houses. So we went to these houses and told the people that their homes were no longer their homes. We provided them no alternative, no place to go, no compensation. They were very confused and scared, and would not leave - so we had to remove them from their houses. There was one family in particular that stands out: a woman with two young daughters, an elderly man who was bed-ridden and two middle-aged men. We dragged them from their houses and threw them onto the street. We arrested the men for not leaving and sent them to prison with the Iraqi police. At that time I didn't know what happened to Iraqis when we put a sandbag over their head and tied their hands behind their back; unfortunately, a couple months later, I had to find out. Our unit was short interrogators, so I was tasked to assist with interrogations. A detainee's ordeal. First, I'd like to point out that the vast majority of detainees I encountered had done nothing wrong. They were arrested for things as simple as being in the area when an IED went off, or living in a village where a suspected insurgent lived.

I witness and participated in many interrogations; one in particular I'd like to share. It was a moment for me that helped me realize the nature of our occupation. This detainee who I was sent to interrogate was stripped down to his underwear, hands bound behind his back and a sandbag on his head - and I never actually saw his face. My job was to take a metal folding chair, and as he was standing face-first against the wall, I was to smash the chair next to his head every time he was asked a question. A fellow soldier would yell the same question over and over, and no matter what he answered, I would smash the chair next to his head. We did this until we got tired, then I was told to make sure he stayed standing facing the wall. By this time he was in an extremely broken state - he was shaking uncontrollably, he was crying, and he was covered in his own urine. I was guarding him, but something was wrong with his leg - he was injured and kept falling to the ground. My sergeant told me to make sure he stayed standing, so I would have to pick him up and slam him against the wall. He kept falling down so I'd have to keep picking him up and forcefully putting him against the wall. My sergeant came by, and was upset that he was on the ground again, so he picked him up and slammed him against the wall several times - and when the man fell to the ground again I noticed blood pouring down from under the sandbag. So I let him sit, and whenever my sergeant starting coming I would warn the man and tell him to stand.

It was then that I realized that I was supposed to be guarding my unit from this detainee, but what I was doing was guarding this detainee from my unit. I tried hard to be proud of my service. All I could feel was shame. Face of occupation is laid bare Racism could no longer mask the reality of the occupation. These were people. These were human beings. I have since been plagued by guilt - anytime I see an elderly man, like the one who couldn't walk, who we rolled onto a stretcher and told the Iraqi police to take him away. I feel guilt anytime I see a mother with her children, like the one who cried hysterically, and screamed that we were worse than Saddam as we forced her from her home. I feel guilt anytime I see a young girl, like the one I grabbed by the arm and dragged into the street. We were told we were fighting terrorists. The real terrorist was me. The real terrorism is this occupation.

Racism within the military has long been an important tool to justify the destruction and occupation of another country. It has long been used to justify the killing, subjugation, and torture of another people. Racism is a vital weapon employed by this government. It is a more important weapon than a rifle, or a tank, or a bomber, or a battleship. It is more destructive than an artillery shell, or a bunker buster, or a tomahawk missile. While all those weapons are created and owned by this government, they are harmless without people willing to use them. Those who send us to war do not have to pull a trigger or lob a mortar round; they don't have to fight the war, they merely have to sell us the war. They need a public who is willing to send their soldiers into harm's way, and they need soldiers who are willing to kill and be killed, without question. They can spend millions on a single bomb - but that bomb only becomes a weapon when the ranks in the military are willing to follow the orders to use it. They can send every last soldier anywhere on earth, but there will only be a war if soldiers are willing to fight. The ruling class - the billionaires who profit from human suffering, who care only about expanding their wealth and controlling the world economy - understand that their power lies only in their ability to convince us that war, oppression, and exploitation is in our interest. They understand that their wealth is dependent on their ability to convince the working class to die to control the market of another country. And convincing us to die and kill is based on their ability to make us think that we are somehow superior. Soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen have nothing to gain from this war. The vast majority of people living in the United States have nothing to gain from this war. In fact, not only do soldiers and workers gain nothing from this occupation, but we suffer more because of it. We lose the limbs, endure the trauma and give our lives. Our families have to watch flag-draped coffins lowered into the earth. Millions in this country without health care, jobs, or access to education must watch this government squander over \$400 million a day on this war.

The real enemy is here Poor and working people in this country are sent to kill poor and working people in another country, to make the rich richer. Without racism, soldiers would realize that they have more in common with the Iraqi people than they do with the billionaires who send us to war. I threw people onto the street in Iraq, only to come home and find families here thrown onto the street in this tragic and unnecessary foreclosure crisis that is already leaving hundreds of Iraq war veterans homeless. We need to wake up and realize that our real enemies are not in some distant land; they're not people whose names we don't know and whose cultures we don't understand. The enemy is people we know well and people we can identify - the enemy is the system that sends us to war when it's profitable; the enemies are the CEOs who lay us off from our jobs when it's profitable; they're the insurance companies who deny us health care when it's profitable; they're the banks that take away our homes when it's profitable. Our enemies are not 5,000 miles away. They are right here at home, and if we organize and fight with our sisters and brothers we can stop this war, stop this government, and create a better world.